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Klein: Form and Meaning: Essays on the Renaissance and Modern Art

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Robert Klein, a Romanian in exile in France, was a "grey eminence" in Renaissance studies (the role of Richelieu being taken by Professor André Chastel). When he died in 1967, at the age of 48, he left behind him little more than a handful of essays. Twenty-five of his essays and reviews were published in 1970 under the title *La forme et l'intelligible*; thirteen of them have now appeared in a not altogether satisfactory English translation.

The selection includes four essays on modern art and literature—witty, elegant, but somewhat light-weight discussions of "the end of the image," "the eclipse of the work of art," and the relationship between modern painting and phenomenology. In the last case Klein was able to make good use of his philosophical training. The strength of the volume, however, lies in what he has to say about the Renaissance. Some of his essays are rather technical and difficult as well as important, notably the two studies on perspective and the discussion of the painter G. P. Lomazzo's use, in his treatise on art, of the astrological ideas of the magician H. C. Agrippa.

For a reader who is not a specialist in the art history of Renaissance Italy, Klein's caliber is most clearly revealed in three essays in this collection, each of which takes on a leading scholar in the field and criticizes him in an acute, precise, and constructive manner. "Burckhardt's *Civilisation of the Renaissance Today*" is unusual in its combination of scrupulous fairness and penetrating criticism. Having

noted the serious omissions in this apparently general survey (there is virtually nothing on the economy, technology, and philosophy of Renaissance Italy, and curiously little about its art), Klein does not fail to stress the book's enduring value, more than a century after its publication, in helping us relate Renaissance art to the rest of Renaissance culture.

"The Theory of Figurative Expression in Italian Treatises on the *Impresa*" suggests, contrary to Sir Ernst Gombrich, who argued the importance of Neo-Platonism in justifying Renaissance symbolic images, that the many treatises on these personal devices depend more on Aristotle (in whose psychology every act was the expression of an idea) than on Plato.

"Thoughts on Iconography" takes issue with the late Erwin Panofsky's essay "Iconography and Iconology," with its celebrated distinction between the primary, secondary, and tertiary meanings (or natural, conventional, and symbolic content) of a work of art, noting the difficulty of sustaining these distinctions owing to the "range of indeterminate or intermediary significations" of paintings. Among other examples, Klein cites the case of laughter being "mimed...by the painted characters, and not represented directly by forms and colours on the canvas." Klein had a remarkable gift for making subtle distinctions of this kind. Perhaps this very gift made it difficult for him to write books rather than essays. At any rate, this collection is both an appropriate (if belated) monument to him and a useful tool for his successors.